

Professor Nelson

English 403

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*Shakespeare and Sexuality: How Women Use Sex as the Ultimate Tool in the Art of  
Manipulation*

At the crux of most great literature lies a passionate desire between two lust-filled characters. The archetypal romance follows a predictable pattern: boy meets girl, boy woos girl, girl falls madly in love, and after overcoming some unforeseen obstacle, they both live happily ever after. Throughout history, wars have been waged over a woman's virtue, love has conquered evil, and sex has created new life. While love and the act of love may seem similar, a few key elements separate these distinct ideas. Sex and love are two entirely different entities and the former habitually exists without the latter. Love stems from affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests whereas sexual lust stems from an overwhelming desire or craving. Although intensely potent, this overwhelming craving can be used to the benefit of the desired. Like many people in literature and life, Shakespeare's characters tend to confuse love with lust. Love is the elusive and rarely achieved ideal whereas sex is an instrument often used in matters of manipulation. The women in Shakespeare's works however, often explore this use of sex as a tool to achieve ulterior goals. Through characters such as Venus and Tamora, Shakespeare suggests that the most effective way for a woman to exercise power is to use sex and carnal desire as implements of influence.

Shakespeare's plays, narrative poems, and sonnets reflect the traditional ideals, standards, and values of England in the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare "was identified with morality and patriotism, even with English virility as against effeminate foreign imports" (Thompson, 210) because he wrote for the masses. As a playwright, he had to keep the desires of his audience at the forefront of his themes to maintain popularity. People attended performances for entertainment and to hear stories pertinent to their own experiences. To understand Shakespeare's portrayal of women using sex as a tool for manipulation, it's imperative to appreciate the female's situation throughout the period in which he wrote. "That women occupied a position subordinate to men in the early modern period is beyond dispute; that this was the 'natural' state of affairs was almost beyond dispute," (McDonald, 254) in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century London. Men had the responsibility of earning for their family while women, "in the absence of any reliable or consistently practiced form of contraception" (McDonald, 255) stayed home with the children they inevitably bore and performed motherly duties including cleaning, cooking, and rearing their young. "From the ancient world through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, physical differences between men and women generated a hierarchy that came to be 'naturalized' in early examples of social theory" (McDonald, 255) which associated greater physical strength with increased intellect and feeling. As the somatically stronger sex, men had a scientifically endorsed superiority to women in almost every aspect of life. In terms of sexuality, women often fell into one of three categories: the virgin, the wife, or the whore. No moral middle ground existed for females of this time and "one of the most frequent forms of abuse directed against educated women was the equation of eloquence and promiscuity where looseness of tongue came to symbolize looseness of body

and spirit” (McDonald, 258). Finding it difficult to fight these conventions rooted in society since Genesis, wives yielded to their husbands and girls submitted to the standards expected of them. Even some of Shakespeare’s “outspoken women endured mockery for using their tongues” (McDonald, 258) because original thought for females defied the status-quo. “So far as Elizabethan heroines were concerned, any want of conformity to, or act of disobedience against, the rule of man was deemed grounds for dramatic and critical castigation,” (Hawkins, 14) to the point where most women avoided confrontation altogether. In the absence of any political or societal voice, women depended on their sexual wiles to manipulate those around them in order to gain power, success, and independence.

In his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, Shakespeare explores the sexual influence of women through the Roman goddess Venus. “By virtue of its exuberant stylistic confidence, *Venus and Adonis* has always been recognized as the leading example of the erotic narrative tradition” (Roe, 62) and highlights the notion that seduction is an art form. Venus is the goddess of love, the epitome of beauty, and the ethereal representation of lust personified. She uses sex as a tool for persuasion in order to manipulate the object of her affection into falling for her. Although Venus represents divine magnificence, Adonis “looks like one of those putti painters do in their pictures’ borders to suggest the ideals of love, of innocent beauty- whatever is just out of reach, for which we strive, and of which we dream, and, much to our shame, we fail to achieve and betray or forget” (Ovid, 209). The goddess has met her match for this mortal represents everything any woman, immortal or not, could ever desire. Venus uses sexual innuendos in an effort to flirt with her young lover and persuade him into sleeping with her. She knows that she is attractive and says that “since I have hemmed thee here within the

circuit of this ivory pale, I'll be a park, and thou shalt be my deer: feed where thou wilt, on mountains or in dale; graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry, stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie" (Shakespeare, 97). The sexual implications here are apparent and Venus isn't shy about using her sexuality to her advantage. She tells Adonis to feed on her every curve, from her chest to her stomach and lower down to her 'pleasant fountain.' As if her previous statement didn't carry enough weight, she insists that he let her "excuse thy courser, gentle boy; and learn of him, I heartily teach thee, to take advantage on presented joy...O, learn to love, the lesson is but plain, and once made perfect, never lost again" (Shakespeare, 103). She uses every trick she can think of to convince Adonis to abandon his impending hunt, stay with her, and take advantage of the joys her company promises. Since she does not simply cast a love spell on the mortal, it is obvious that her powers lie not in her divinity but rather in the effectiveness of her sexual persuasions. "Like all poems which seem in any way to advocate sexual license," (Roe, 28) *Venus and Adonis* explores the differences between love and lust by highlighting the moral variances of both characters. "The differences separating Venus and Adonis, differences of temperament, inclination, and dispositions, differences in ethical outlook including each's own internal contradictions" (Roe, 118) are evident in the way they interact with each other throughout the poem. Although her intense sexuality appears to be her greatest tool for persuasion, Venus' attempts to romance Adonis ultimately fall short. Adonis seems repulsed by her desperate pleas and tells her that "Love comforteth like sunshine after rain, but Lust's effect is tempest after sun; Love's gentle spring doth always fresh remain; Lust's winter comes ere summer half be done; Love surfeits not, Lust like a glutton dies; Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies" (Shakespeare, 116). While Venus is most likely aware of the

distinction between love and lust, it's apparent that her seduction techniques were neither subtle nor effective. Although Venus' failure to persuade Adonis' heart might be interpreted as a lack of power over matters of love, Adonis is an exceptionally rare case of male willpower in the presence of sexual desire. Venus laments his death but ultimately carries on to manipulate many more men with her tangible sexuality.

Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* also examines the use of sex as a tool for manipulation by dramatizing "relationships between representations of virginity, chastity, and rape and constructions of masculine power" (Harris, 384). In the play's opening scene, Roman warrior Titus murders one of Tamora's sons as a sacrificial offering for his defeat of the Goths. From this point, Tamora dreams of payback and decides to use sex as a tool for her revenge. Tamora is the Queen of the Goths, a stunning specimen of royalty and attractiveness who incites the lust of Roman Emperor Saturninus. She promises that "here in sight of heaven to Rome I swear, if Saturnine advance the Queen of Goths, she will a handmaid be to his desires, a loving nurse, a mother to his youth" (Folger Titus, 336-339) because she knows that in order to enact vengeance on Titus, she must win the affection of the Emperor first. "Her value depends primarily on the political juxtaposition of the Romans and the Goths, and outside that reference, she has little value unless she is found to be sexually attractive," (Harris, 386) a fact she is acutely aware of. After securing the title of Empress, Tamora devises a ruthlessly barbaric plan with the help of her lover Aaron. Although Aaron admittedly enjoys inciting chaos and suffering on his own, his lust for Tamora certainly plays a part in his willingness to help her hurt the Andronicus family. Tamora "functions as that feared side of sexuality: an insatiable sexuality turned loose-a sexuality uncontrolled and uninhibited" (Harris, 400) that can make a

man under its spell do almost anything. Solely motivated by revenge, she vows to “find a day to massacre them all and raze their family, the cruel father and the traitorous sons, to whom I sued for my dear son’s life, and make them know what ‘tis to let a queen kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain” (Folger Titus, 459-464). She feels robbed of her son’s life so she decides to make Titus feel the pain of seeing his daughter Lavinia suffer. Lavinia’s power “is also related to her sexuality and to her function as a ‘changing piece’ from virgin to marital chastity” (Harris, 389) and she represents purity based on her young age and unmarried position. “Since she cannot strike directly at the men who oppress her, Tamora chooses to revenge herself on Lavinia,” (Harris, 387) a target equally as satisfying but infinitely easier to damage. Tamora knows that the best way to hurt Titus, to bring shame and heartache to the man that took her son away, is to make his daughter impure by robbing her of her precious chastity as violently as possible. To bring her plan to fruition, she enlists the help of her two remaining sons and pleads “remember, boys, I poured forth tears in vain to save your brother from the sacrifice, but fierce Andronicus would not relent; therefore, away with [Lavinia] and use her as you will; the worse to her, the better loved of me (Folger Titus, 840-844). Not only does she beg her sons to shame the young Lavinia, she condones raping the innocent child. Without her virginity, Lavinia’s “ability to serve as a mark of authority or power is undone” (Harris, 398) which will serve to destroy the girl’s future as well as destroy her father’s heart. Just as sex can help a woman harness her power into achieving a goal or, in this case, carry out revenge, it can also destroy her life. This notion is painfully apparent in Lavinia’s tragic story. As a woman that “owns and enjoys her sexuality,” (Harris, 401) Tamora takes full advantage of

her seductive techniques and femininity to manipulate the men in her life into helping her ruin Titus through his daughter.

As Shakespeare demonstrates in his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* and his play *Titus Andronicus*, a woman's sexuality is often her greatest asset in exercising power through manipulation. While this notion may be incredibly distasteful to feminists and modern women in general, it certainly proved useful for females of the Elizabethan era. In Shakespeare's time, a woman's political, societal, and cultural domain extended solely to her home life and the only supremacy she had was over her children. Although England relied on Queen Elizabeth to rule the sovereign nation, this powerful female was a novelty and her influential leadership didn't translate into political authority for women throughout the country. The manipulation of men through sexual wiles offered women the chance to get what they wanted but couldn't take outright. In Venus' case, she used her erotic prowess to try and persuade Adonis into loving her. Although her methods ultimately failed, the goddess had no shortage of admirers and men willing to die for a night with her. For Tamora, her sexual manipulation of Aaron and Saturninus allowed her to devastate Titus and fulfill her lust for revenge. While some believe that women willing to exploit their femininity for anything other than true love is morally reprehensible, others argue that the idea is innately smart and justifiably resourceful. Although Shakespeare doesn't overtly declare allegiance with either view, I believe his female characters implicitly show he's in favor of the latter.

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